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Intelligence Memorandum

Guatemala: The Election's Warning Signal

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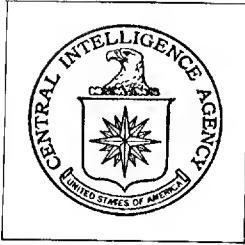
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Summary

Nearly two months after the election, the government of President Carlos Arana shows no signs of allowing "defeat" at the polls to stop it from inaugurating its own candidate, General Kjell Laugerud, as president on July 1. Most observers but not the one that matters in Guatemala—the government—credit left-of-center opposition candidate General Efraim Rios Montt with winning nearly half the votes on March 3. The official count, which Congress perfunctorily approved one week after the election, gave Laugerud nearly 45 percent of the vote and Rios not quite 34 percent.

Up to now, the government has faced only sporadic and minor resistance to the election fraud and to its muzzling of the left, but it will probably have to contend for some time with resentment from those who feel they were cheated. The electoral process, at best perhaps only a thin veneer of democracy over a repressive government, has been further discredited.

The legitimate left-of-center opposition, though it had no solid assurances it would have been in charge under a Rios government, has been deprived of any chance to exert significant influence. The moderates among this force may merely grumble and seek to find security in jobs with the Laugerud administration, but the more extreme critics may resort to violence to express their dissatisfaction.

The country's leftist terrorists, though battered by severe government counter-insurgency actions over the past decade and beset with internal disunity, might again consider the use of violence to undermine the government. The terrorists, however, are well aware of the power of the right wing and its propensity to use violence to put down violence. If they choose to resume their fight against the well-established rightist forces, they are likely to bring on even more government repression. The danger is that the more hot headed among them may feel that trying to work with the left to achieve their goals is now impossible. They may welcome increased repression by the government, hoping that this will heighten the possibilities for a successful revolutionary movement in the future.

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Just as important to the country's future political peace and harmony is the government's reaction to any challenge from the left. Every Guatemalan government over the past half century has to one degree or another used extra-legal violence against its political enemies, real or imagined. The society has become inured to the violence on both sides, but should the extremists turn to terror and the Laugerud government respond with counter-terror, political polarization could reach the danger point.

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